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MAX STIRNER.*

WHAT shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own Ego? That is practically the question put by Max Stirner in his once celebrated, forgotten and now resuscitated book, "The Ego and his Own" (*"Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum"*). Some one has called man a metaphysical animal; he is either a Platonian or an Aristotelian. Nowadays you are either a Socialist or an Individualist. You may not care a straw for either party, yet fate, your temperament and social position, settles the matter without asking, by your leave. Under which King? Dr. Butler has spoken of an intellectual aristocracy and service—which is only Nietzscheism attenuated by slumming; Nietzsche would have naught to do with such merciful condescension. For him it was like Brand—All or Nothing. In the Stirner case we descend into a lower Dantean circle. The Ego is the frame of the human picture in this airless, sublimated atmosphere. Yet once breathed, even Nietzsche's mountain top seems thin, rarefied and bloodless by comparison. Never has the hymn to Self to the Will been sung in such firm, cool tones; never logic more infernal—or celestial. (Under which King?) A homely motto for Stirner might be Walt Whitman's, "I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones."

Who is Max Stirner? We knew nothing of him until John Henry Mackay, the Scottish-German revolutionary poet, dug up his buried book and with it, after incalculable pains, a few isolated facts. Stirner was a nickname because of his high forehead; Johann Caspar Schmidt was his real name. He was born in Bayreuth, 1806, and died in Berlin, 1856. He had a university education, though he did not distinguish himself, by taking a doctor degree. He taught in a fashionable girls' school, contracted an unhappy marriage, died in poverty and obscurity. He met for a decade or so many radical thinkers at a certain circle in Berlin, yet he was more influenced by the Hegelian philosophy than by the revolutionary spirit of 1848. He loathed politics. He feared and hated socialism. He was a solitary by nature. Temperament tells in a philosopher as well as a poet. A hesitating, timid man, a sufferer doubtless from *aboulia*, as was

* "The Ego and his Own." By Max Stirner. Translated from the German by Steven T. Byington, with an introduction by Dr. James Walker. New York: Benjamin R. Tucker.

Amiel, Stirner in his book (1845) enjoyed a psychic victory over his weakness of volition. It was the one vigorous affirmation of his will to live.

For those who love to think of the visible universe as a cozy corner of God's footstool, there is something bleak and terrifying in the isolated position of man since science postulated him as an unimportant bubble on an unimportant planet. The soul shrinks as our conception of outer space widens. Thomas Hardy describes the sensation as "ghastly." There is said to be no purpose, no design in all the gleaming phantasmagoria revealed by the astronomer's glass; while on our globe we are a brother to lizards, bacteria furnish our motor force, and our brain is but a subtly fashioned mirror, composed of neuronie filaments, a sort of "dark room" in which is pictured the life without. Well, we admit, for the sake of the argument, that we banish God from the firmament, substituting a superior mechanism; we admit our descent from plasma and ascidian worms, we know that we have no free will, because man, like the unicellular organisms, "gives to every stimulus without an inevitable response." That, of course, settles all moral obligations. But we had hoped, we of the old sentimental brigade, that all things being thus adjusted we could live with our fellow man in (comparative) peace, cheating him only in a legitimate business way, and loving our neighbor better than ourselves (in public). Ibsen had jostled our self-satisfaction sadly, but some obliging critic had discovered his formula—a pessimistic decadent—and with consoling verbal bones we worried the old white-haired mastiff of Norway. Only a decadent! It is an easy word to speak in the mouth of the mediocre, and it means nothing. With Nietzsche the case was simpler. We couldn't read him because he was a madman; but he, at least, was an aristocrat who held the bourgeois in contempt, and he also held a brief for culture. Ah! when we are young we are idealists, altruists; as Thackeray says, "Youths go to balls; men go to dinners."

But along comes this dreadful Stirner, who cries out: Hypocrites all of you. You are not altruists, but selfish persons, who, self-illuded, believe yourselves to be disinterested. Be Egoists! Confess the truth in the secrecy of your mean, little souls. We are all Egotists. Be Egoists. There is no truth but my truth. No world but my world. I am I. And then Stirner waves

away God, state, society, the family, morals, mankind, leaving only the "hateful" ego. The cosmos is frosty and inhuman, and old Mother Earth no longer offers us her bosom as a reclining-place. Stirner has so decreed it. We are suspended between heaven and earth, like Mahomet's coffin, hermetically sealed in Self. Instead of "smiting the chord of self," we must reorchestrate the chord that it may give out richer music.

Nevertheless, there is a magnificent honesty in the words of Max Stirner, that proclaims him to be no vendor of prophylactics. We are weary of the crying in the market-place, "Lo! Christ is risen," only to find an old nostrum tricked out in socialistic phrases; and fine phrases make fine feathers for these gentlemen who offer the millennium in one hand and perfect peace in the other. Stirner is the frankest thinker of his century. He does not soften his propositions, harsh ones for most of us, with promises, but pursues his thought with ferocious logic to its covert. There is no such hybrid with him like "Christian Socialism," no dodging issues. He is a Teutonic Childe Roland who to the dark tower comes, but instead of blowing his horn—as Nietzsche did—he blows up the tower itself. Such an iconoclast has never before put pen to paper. He is so sincere in his scorn of all we hold dear that he is refreshing. Nietzsche's flashing epigrammatic blade often snaps after it is fleshed; the grim old Stirner, after he makes a jab at his opponent, twists the steel in the wound. Having no mercy for himself, he has no mercy for others. He is never a hypocrite. He erects no altars to known or unknown gods. Humanity, he says, has become the Moloch to-day to which everything is sacrificed. Humanity—that is, the State, perhaps, even the Socialistic state (the most awful yoke of all for the individual soul). This assumed love of humanity, this sacrifice of our own personality, are the blights of modern life. The Ego has too long been suppressed by ideas, sacred ideas of religion, state, family, law, morals. The conceptual question, "What is Man?" must be changed to "Who is Man?" I am the owner of my might, and I am so when I know myself as *unique*. What then is my property? Nothing but what is my power. I empower myself. Man is free. *Things*—property—are not. Therefore the State is my enemy, it does not allow me to compete. The poor are to blame for the rich. We should all be the rich. All is for all. I am an owner of property, but property is not sacred. My power is my

property; my power give me property; I am myself my own power, and therefore my own property.

Stirner is not a communist—so long confounded with anarchs—he does not believe in force. That element came into the world with the advent of Bakounine and Russian nihilism. Stirner would replace society by groups; property would be held, money would be a circulating medium; the present compulsory system would be voluntary instead of involuntary. Unlike his great contemporary, Joseph Proudhon, Stirner is not a constructive philosopher. Indeed, he is no philosopher. A moralist (or immoralist), an *Ethiker*, his book is a defence of Egoism, of the submerged rights of the ego, and in these piping times of peace and fraternal humbug, when every nation, every man embraces his neighbor preparatory to disembowelling him in commerce or war, Max Stirner's words are like a trumpet-blast. And many Jericho-built walls go down before these ringing tones. His doctrine is the Fourth Dimension of ethics. That his book will be more dangerous than a million bombs, if misapprehended, is no reason why it should not be read. Its author can no more be held responsible for its misreading than the orthodox faiths for their backsliders. Nietzsche has been wofully misunderstood; Nietzsche, the despiser of mob rule, has been acclaimed a very Attila—instead of which he is a culture-philosopher, one who insists that reform must be first spiritual. Individualism for him means only an end to culture. Stirner is not a metaphysician; he is too much realist. He is a Hegelian *à rebours*, a political pyrrhonist. His Ego is his Categorical Imperative. And if the Individual loses his value, what is his *raison d'être* for existence? Make your value felt, cries Stirner. The minority may occasionally err, but the majority is always in the wrong. Egoism must not be misinterpreted as petty selfishness or as an excuse to do wrong. Life will be ennobled and sweeter if we respect ourselves. "There is no sinner and no sinful egoism. . . . Do not call men sinful; and *they are not*." Freedom is not a goal. "Free—from what? Oh! what is there that cannot be shaken off? The yoke of serfdom, of sovereignty, of aristocracy and princes, the dominion of the desires and passions; yes, even the dominion of one's own will, of self-will, for the completest self-denial is nothing but freedom—freedom, to wit, from self-determination, from one's own

self." This has an ascetic tang, and indicates that to compass our complete ego the road travelled will be as thorny as any saint's of old. Where does Woman come into this scheme? There is no Woman, only a human Ego. Humanity is a convenient fiction to harry the individualist. So society, family are the clamps that compress the soul of woman. If woman is to be free she must first be an individual, an ego. In America, to talk of female suffrage is to propound the paradox of the masters attacking their slaves; yet female suffrage might prove a good thing—it might demonstrate the *reductio ad absurdum* of the administration of the present ballot system.

A theory needs practical application, just as no religion, worth the name, can exist without dogma (or man without a skeleton). In America, Democracy is on the defensive—it must prove that it is not a failure, that it is not a Boojum that is a Snark; not a Republic that is an Oligarchy. The temper of the people, from Washington to Wall Street, from the Golden Gate to the Bowery, is not for "meddling" reforms, despite the hullabaloo in the press; it rather leans to the methods that will give them something for nothing (power and plunder). All this parade of politics is only the modern substitute for the *panem et circenses* of the old Romans—who, however, were fairer, franker, giving the multitude food and distraction. But for us it is a Barmecide's feast, on paper. In the newspapers we read with tremendous interest about the doings of President this or President that, of the movements and words of Senators and Representatives, as if all this glory and show were aught but a scheme to keep interested—therefore in a not dangerous condition—the people. And these mystifications, intrigues, pot-house politics and high-jinks of the powers that be, do not better economic conditions—for it makes no difference really to the working-man whether Roosevelt or the Mikado is President. Each man is in politics for what it brings *him*. Government by representation only represents the interests of the party or the man who happens to be in the political saddle. The devil take the hindmost! The people go hang! Thus the Stirnerites. Our wail over our neighbor's soul is simply the wail of a busybody. Mind your own business! is the pregnant device of the new Egoism. Puritanism is not morality, but a psychic disorder. Despite the "sweetness and light" diffused by the late Matthew Arnold in England and America, he did not kill, only "scotched"

puritanism and philistinism. That it rears its flat, ugly head whenever it dares was demonstrated by the public hysteria over Bernard Shaw, Gorky and the music of Richard Strauss. And then the sweet beast fell upon the choice banquet provided by a notorious murder trial! Of such are your gods, O Philistia! Banish art, banish beauty, but erect an altar, a paper altar, to vulgarity, crime and stupidity. We may have no sense of the eternal verities, but we do possess a pretty and depraved taste in the matter of freak religions.

Stirner, in his way, teaches that the Kingdom of God is within you. That man will ever be sufficiently perfected to become his own master is a dreamer's dream. Yet let us dream it. At least by that road we make for righteousness. But let us drop all cant about brotherly love and self-sacrifice. Let us love ourselves (respect our ego), that we may learn to respect our brother; self-sacrifice means doing something that we believe to be good for our souls, therefore egotism—the higher egotism, withal egotism. As for going to the people—the Russian phrase—let the people forget themselves as a collective body, tribe or group, and each man and woman develop his or her ego. In Russia “going to the people” was sincere—in America it is a trick to catch, not souls, but votes. Our brilliant editorial intellects go down into the mud to spear miserable tadpoles, and after years the mud is as thick, as black as before, the tadpoles more numerous. If sentimental millionaire Socialists could but hear what they are called by the East-Siders—who, by the way, are doing most of the thinking in this city—they might abandon their self-imposed and charmingly advertised charities.

“The time is not far distant when it will be impossible for any proud, free, independent spirit to call himself a Socialist, since he would be classed with those wretched toadies and worshippers of success, who even now lie on their knees before every working-man and lick his hands simply because he is a working-man.” Trade-unionism is become more menacing than the trusts.

John Henry Mackay spoke those truthful words in a striking book of his. Did not Campanella, in an unforgettable sonnet, sing, “The people is a beast of muddy brain that knows not its own strength. . . . With its own hands it ties and gags itself”? Max Stirner may shock, may amuse you. But he is bound to set you thinking.

JAMES HUNEKER.